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SUBJECT: Aftermath of Presidential Elections: New Energy for  
Opposition Parties and Renewed Calls for Electoral Reform

REF: Zagreb 78

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Summary and Comment  
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1. (SBU) Croatian President Stjepan Mesic was re-elected to a second five-year term on January 16, defeating his ruling party Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) opponent Jadranka Kosor 66 to 34 percent. Four months before local elections (scheduled for May 17, 2005), Mesic's victory could energize the opposition parties that rallied behind him. Kosor's self-described "respectable" finish was significantly boosted by Bosnian Croat votes at polling stations in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). Continued reports of small-scale irregularities (reftel) are renewing calls for election law reform, with Mesic out front pushing for an end to diaspora voting, which would require constitutional changes. With the HDZ now narrowly controlling the parliament, it will want to keep the four "diaspora" seats it holds. President Mesic's support for the idea of disenfranchising the diaspora, now that the issue is in the eye of a sympathetic public, could force at least some important reforms at the margins to clean up a few legal and procedural loopholes that open the door to embarrassing (if not widespread) irregularities. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

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Easy Win ...  
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2. (U) Croatian President Stjepan Mesic easily won a second term in the second round of presidential elections, defeating the HDZ's Jadranka Kosor by a 2 to 1 margin. Voter turnout was 51 percent, similar to first-round turnout. Mesic won in 19 counties and in all but one major city; Kosor won in two counties by a narrow margin, and attracted the vast majority of the Croatian diaspora, a segment traditionally loyal to the HDZ. Some ten opposition parties backed Mesic's candidacy, including the Social Democrats (SDP), his former People's Party (HNS) and the Peasant Party (HSS).

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... Weakens HDZ for Local Elections?  
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3. (U) Although HDZ leaders portray their score as a "respectable result," analysts agree that Mesic's victory confirmed the declining popularity of Croatia's biggest party. Exit polls indicated that Mesic led by 71 to 29 percent of the vote in Croatia itself, while Kosor's figures increased only after the votes from the diaspora, mainly in BiH, were added. In addition, hard right voters did not swing disproportionately to Kosor in the runoff, despite some ham-handed HDZ attempts to exploit Mesic's sealed ICTY testimony to sway voters.

4. (U) Opposition parties now hope to exploit Mesic's victory in the local elections scheduled in May. SDP leader Ivica Racan said Mesic's re-election is the first victory and the local elections will bring a second, setting up a showdown between the opposition and the HDZ and forcing early parliamentary elections (not due until 2007). Mesic himself said he would not necessarily be neutral at the local elections, suggesting he might return the favor to the opposition parties that rallied behind him.

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Reform Needed  
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5. (SBU) Small-scale voting irregularities, primarily in BiH, similar to that in the first round (reftel), are invigorating proponents of electoral reform. After the first round, election monitoring NGO GONG identified a number of irregularities. These included dead people on voter lists (some even checked off as having voted) and the addition of names to the voter list on the spot (especially in BiH). Adding names on election day is legal, but opens the door to double voting. A local journalist of dual citizenship proved that this was easy to do - first casting her vote in Karlovac, just south of Zagreb, and then crossing into BiH and voting again in Mostar. A central register of voters would eliminate this problem. NGO Juris Protecta estimates that the number of names on Croatian voter lists is at least half a million

higher than the number of the actual voters. Most recently, the GoC announced it would seek to resolve this problem before local elections in May.

16. (U) Parliament Speaker Vladimir Seks said on January 17 that the Local Election Law would be changed to allow only actual residents to vote, not those who live elsewhere and only have a registered residence in Croatia. This does not address the diaspora vote -- as Croatian citizens abroad do not vote in local elections -- but it could result in more accurate voter lists that

will reduce the possibility of irregularities at future elections. While saying that diaspora citizens should be equal to any other Croatian citizens, Prime Minister Sanader noted that the GoC would initiate the signing of a bilateral agreement with BiH that could regulate the voting status of dual citizens.

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